Student Performance Q&A:

2014 AP® Music Theory Free-Response Questions

The following comments on the 2014 free-response questions for AP® Music Theory were written by the Chief Reader, Teresa Reed of the University of Tulsa. They give an overview of each free-response question and of how students performed on the question, including typical student errors. General comments regarding the skills and content that students frequently have the most problems with are included. Some suggestions for improving student performance in these areas are also provided. Teachers are encouraged to attend a College Board workshop to learn strategies for improving student performance in specific areas.

Question 1

What was the intent of this question?

This question assessed students' ability to:

- hear a minor melody in simple meter;
- hear tonic and dominant scale degrees;
- hear and notate the dotted rhythm in the second measure of the melody;
- hear and notate the raised 7th scale degree of harmonic minor;
- differentiate between conjunct and disjunct motion;
- notate pitches correctly in treble clef; and
- hear scalar motion from 5 down to 1.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.26 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Missing the dotted rhythm in the second measure
- Missing the accidental for the raised 7th scale degree
- Lowering the 3rd scale degree (which is already a minor third above the tonic)
- Writing the interval from scale degree 2 to scale degree 5 as 2 to 4
- Writing syncopation instead of the dotted rhythm
- Doubling the rhythmic values, thus writing in duple meter
- Using poor notation: writing noteheads without stems; stems and dots on the wrong side of the note; and other notation mistakes

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Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

- Practice dictation in simple and compound meter and in major and minor modes.
- Discuss common leaps.
- Practice hearing tonic triad intervals in various rhythms.
- Think segment by segment, but also note how each segment fits into the whole.
- Drill common melodic patterns.
- Have students sing back what they write, not just what they hear.
- Connect scales to actual music.
- Play examples on other instruments as well as on piano.
- Practice melodic dictation examples from past exams.
- Teach proper notation.

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This question assessed students' ability to:

- hear a major melody in compound meter;
- hear and notate the raised 4^{th} scale degree and the return to the diatonic 4^{th} scale degree in the same measure;
- hear and notate dotted rhythms;
- hear and notate melodic leaps;
- hear scalar and triadic patterns in a major key; and
- notate pitches correctly in bass clef.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 2.95 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Notating in $\frac{6}{4}$ instead of in $\frac{6}{8}$ meter
- Notating in simple meter ($\frac{3}{4}$ meter)
- Notating the final note as a dotted half note instead of as a dotted quarter note
- Writing noteheads without stems
- Writing the dots and/or accidentals on the wrong side of the noteheads

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

- Give students frequent practice and provide prompt feedback on dictation exercises.
- Help students find an effective and consistent procedure for dictation.
- Work to help students think more holistically.
- Teach students to set up expectations for what they will hear.
- Teach students to memorize the melody as they listen and then to mentally rehearse the melody between hearings.

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- Give lots of exercises in compound meter.
- Help students practice identifying the tonic pitch.
- Help students practice identifying pitches at phrase beginnings and endings.
- Help students have a clear understanding of secondary function implications.
- Teach correct rhythmic notation, including appropriate placement of dots and beams.
- Emphasize the importance of legible notation.
- Remind students to follow the directions for the exercise (i.e., no rests).
- Advise students to use pencil rather than pen to complete dictation exercises.
- Sight sing regularly.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

This question assessed students' ability to:

- hear a chord progression in four parts in a major key;
- notate the soprano and bass lines of the progression;
- provide the correct Roman numeral analysis of the chords;
- hear, notate, and analyze an authentic cadence;
- hear and notate triads and seventh chords in inversions; and
- hear and notate falling intervals of a third, fourth, and fifth in the bass line.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 12.77 out of a possible 24 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Failing to correctly notate the leap of a third, fourth, and fifth in the bass line
- Incorrectly adding a secondary dominant to the progression
- Writing a note a step off and writing the other notes in that line in relation to the earlier wrong note, resulting in the entire line being displaced by a step
- Failing to recognize the dominant seventh chord in inversion
- Failing to recognize the authentic cadence

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

- Teach students to identify cadence types and to work backwards from the ends of phrases.
- Encourage students to check that their bass and soprano lines match their Roman numeral analysis.
- Emphasize distinguishing seventh chords from triads.
- Practice hearing and notating inverted chords.
- Practice two-part dictation when given a four-part aural prompt.

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Question 4

What was the intent of this question?

This question assessed students' ability to:

- hear a four-part progression in a minor key and notate the outer voices;
- provide the correct Roman numeral analysis of the chords;
- demonstrate a knowledge of common chord progressions;
- hear and notate triads and seventh chords in root position and in inversion;
- hear a chordal 7^{th} in an inner voice;
- hear and properly notate the outer voices and the analysis of the secondary dominant chord;
- hear and notate chromaticized pitches relevant to the tonicization of the subdominant;
- hear and notate ascending chromatic motion in the soprano line;
- hear, notate, and analyze a deceptive cadence; and
- hear and properly label the outer voices and Roman numerals of the cadential six-four chord.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 9.34 out of a possible 24 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Omitting the sharp needed for the leading tone in a minor key
- Writing the words "leading tone" before the question and failing to write the accidental for the leading tone in the staff notation
- Omitting the sharp needed for the secondary dominant chord
- Using enharmonic spellings of altered tones not characteristic to the key
- Not recognizing seventh chords when the chordal seventh is in an inner voice
- Failing to recognize the cadential six-four chord
- Failing to identify the secondary dominant in the progression
- Writing a leading tone and sometimes a raised submediant scale degree in the descending bass line
- Writing the soprano opening gesture in the bass clef and the bass opening gesture in the treble clef
- Writing the word "deceptive" under the cadence and not writing the corresponding bass line or Roman numerals for a deceptive cadence

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

- Work consistently on ear training skills.
- Teach common cadential chord progressions.
- Teach common passing chord progressions.
- Emphasize chromatic alterations needed in minor keys and for secondary dominant chords.
- Practice hearing and notating skips within the tonic triad.
- Practice dictation with chord progressions in a variety of meters.

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Question 5

What was the intent of this question?

This question assessed students' ability to:

- realize a figured bass progression in Common Practice style;
- demonstrate an understanding of diatonic harmony including chord spelling in a four-part texture, voice leading, and doubling;
- analyze chords using Roman numerals;
- spell chords in a minor key (attention to raised leading tone);
- write and resolve a cadential six-four chord; and
- notate an authentic cadence;
- correctly prepare and resolve a 4-3 suspension;
- correctly prepare and resolve the chordal 7^{th}; and
- correctly realize inverted triads and seventh chords utilizing all chord members.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 12.85 out of a possible 25 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Failing to supply a correct Roman numeral analysis
- Mistakenly identifying chords four and seven as IV
- Altering and/or mislabeling the ii^6_5 chord as V^6_5/V
- Incorrectly realizing the figures, particularly the 4–3 suspension
- Trouble realizing figures that indicate chromatic alterations, especially chords two and six; this oversight had significant negative consequences
- Incorrectly realizing the stepwise voice-leading that is specified in the figures for chords five to six
- Reversing the order of the I^6_4 and V^7 (Roman numerals, chord spelling, or both)
- Writing incomplete inverted seventh chords (the ii^6_5)
- Writing parallel fifths and octaves (especially octaves between outer voices in chords two to three and fifths between tenor and bass in chords six to seven)
- Writing hidden fifths and hidden octaves
- Failing to correctly prepare and resolve the chordal 7^{th}
- Using incorrect spacing
- Writing overlapping voices
- Failing to resolve outer-voice 7 to tonic
- Using incorrect doubling in the six-four triads

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

- Consult the AP® Course Description Guide and other web resources.
- Coach students on how to avoid over-complicating the required tasks.
- Master the major and minor scales, aiming for true fluency. Too many students seem to learn key signatures without associating each key with scale degrees and common bass patterns (cadences, etc.).

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- Clarify the difference between chromatic scale-degree inflections typical for minor (raised 7, Picardy 3rd, etc.) and chromaticisim connected with secondary dominants.
- Encourage students to think about voice leading before working on vertical realization.
- Review the meanings of the figures, giving special attention to identification of chordal roots.
- Emphasize that figured bass is not the same thing as inversion symbols.
- Teach students to use stepwise motion and to keep the common tone whenever possible. (Think like a singer.)
- Drill chord spelling and remind students that chord spelling errors result in a 5-point deduction.
- Teach students to properly prepare and resolve chordal 7ths.
- Practice writing clear, unambiguous musical notation by hand.

Question 6

What was the intent of this question?

This question assessed students' ability to:

- write a four-part chord progression from Roman numerals;
- demonstrate an understanding of chord inversions;
- demonstrate command of voice-leading procedures, including stepwise root progressions, root progressions by third, and root progressions by fifth;
- demonstrate knowledge of secondary dominant chords;
- demonstrate an understanding of tendency tones and their resolutions;
- write a half cadence with proper voice leading.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 9.80 out of a possible 18 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Missing the C-sharp on the secondary dominant chord
- Confusing the IV and vi chords
- Writing parallel octaves and fifths
- Using incorrect spacing
- Writing incomplete inverted chords
- Writing incorrect inversions: either putting all chords in root position or confusing $\frac{4}{3}$ with $\frac{4}{2}$
- Leaping down into the chordal 7th
- Omitting or adding a chordal 7th
- Not resolving the chordal 7th

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

- Encourage students to use smooth voice leading.
- Encourage students to use contrary motion in the outer voices.
- Encourage students to write the outer voices first and to fill in the inner voices as a pair, after the outer voices have been carefully checked.
- Avoid overemphasis of doubling the root, as this is not always appropriate.
- Think carefully about the key signature, about whether a chord should need any accidentals, and, if so, which specific accidentals are needed.

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- Be careful not to confuse the leading tone (scale-degree seven) with the chordal 7th.
- Drill inversions and their figures, carefully distinguishing triads from seventh chords. Students should be aware that they will not receive any points for a chord if the inversion is incorrect or if a 7th is added or omitted (i.e., does not match the analysis provided.)
- Focus on proper treatment of dissonance, especially the approach to and resolution of the chordal 7th.
- Advise students not to add embellishing tones unless specifically required by the figures.
- Discuss the appropriate use of charts, diagrams, and other memory aids. Writing charts and diagrams often seems unhelpful for this particular question: it takes time; the information is not always relevant to the question; and the layout sometimes seems to cause mistakes because the student confuses the layout of the diagram with the actual music notation.
- Address issues of notation, particularly the proper way to write a notehead and accidentals, and how to portray doubling.

Question 7

What was the intent of this question?

This question assessed students' ability to:

- compose a bass line following the rules of eighteenth-century counterpoint;
- write standard cadences;
- recognize and correctly use a secondary dominant chord;
- use conventional harmonic patterns;
- avoid creating cross relations or doubled leading tones; and
- use embellishments correctly in a two-part framework.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 4.61 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Doubling the leading tone when harmonizing the melodic leading tones
- Using the I^7 and IV^7 chords and their inversions, resulting in inappropriate harmonizations in this style
- Creating a cross relation at the beginning of measure 6
- Using six-four chords improperly
- Writing harmonic perfect fourths between the soprano and bass
- Overusing the vii° chord in root position
- Writing V^7–V (a progression in which the chordal 7th disappears)
- Ignoring the secondary dominant
- Incorrectly harmonizing or resolving the secondary dominant
- Writing harmonic retrogressions, particularly in the final measure
- Using inappropriate inversions at the cadence
- Using V^7 at a half cadence

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Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

- Teach students to recognize melodic patterns and the appropriate ways to harmonize such patterns.
- Remind students that unaccented passing tones are the only appropriate embellishment for this exercise.
- Discourage the use of six-four chords, except for the cadential six-four chord if appropriate at a cadence.
- Encourage the use of root position chords at cadences.
- Discourage the use of the root position vii° chord.
- Teach students to prepare and resolve 7^{ths} properly.

Question S1

What was the intent of this question?

This question assessed students' ability to:

- sight read and sing a melody in major mode;
- perform common rhythmic patterns;
- perform dotted rhythms;
- perform conjunct motion;
- sing a two-phrase unit with motion from *do* to *sol*;
- sing in simple meter;
- retain a sense of tonic;
- read in bass clef; and
- perform chordal skips on the tonic and dominant.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 5.48 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Failing to hold the last note for its full value

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

- Sight sing regularly in class.
- Encourage students not to hum, but to sing on a vowel sound; humming obscures accurate pitch.
- Encourage students to sing strongly so they can be heard.
- Encourage students to sing the tonic triad to establish the key/tonic.
- Encourage students to select a starting pitch that is comfortable for their individual range.
- Encourage students to ghost-finger along, as if playing their instruments, while singing.
- Encourage students to sing using contour and not just rhythm on tonic if they struggle greatly with pitch.
- Encourage students to keep going even if they make a mistake.

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- Practice common rhythmic patterns in various meters.
- Emphasize holding notes for their full value.
- Allow students to use a neutral syllable if, by March, they are struggling with solfège or numbers.
- Encourage students to sing aloud during the 75-second practice time.
- Encourage students to practice rhythm first during the 75-second practice time.
- Encourage students to write on the test during the 75-second practice period.
- Encourage students to conduct while they practice so they establish a steady tempo.
- Give practice AP® Music Theory Exams.
- Review the recording directions with the proctor.

Question S2

What was the intent of this question?

This question assessed students' ability to:

- sight read and sing a melody in minor mode, using various forms of the scale;
- sing in compound meter;
- use of accidentals
- sing note values at the beat, the division, and the subdivision level;
- sing dotted rhythms
- sing across the vocal range
- sing skips and stepwise motion – in both ascending and descending direction
- pattern recognition
- outline a dominant and subdominant triad – as well as a tonic triad
- establish and maintain a steady tempo
- retain a sense of tonic; and
- read treble clef.

How well did students perform on this question?

The mean score for this question was 3.79 out of a possible 9 points.

What were common student errors or omissions?

- Singing in major mode instead of in minor, or mixing the modes
- Failing to hold the last note for its full value
- Performing rhythms incorrectly, especially the dotted rhythms
- Not singing in compound meter
- Singing a whole step instead of a half step in segments 1 and 3
- Missing the descending major sixth in segment 6
- Not singing the fourth scale degree in the penultimate segment
- Overshooting larger intervals
- Not managing time well

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Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

- Start singing early in the year; sing often in major and minor modes and in simple and compound meters.
- Teach and use a system of singing, such as numbers, solfège, etc.
- Teach scale degrees and their relation to tonic.
- Emphasize the difference between major and minor scales and triads.
- Practice singing in all forms of minor.
- Practice descending scalar and intervallic patterns in all forms of the minor key.
- Practice minor triad arpeggios, both throughout the octave and with just pairs of notes, for example, *do-me*, *sol-me*.
- Practice executing rhythms, including dotted rhythms.
- Emphasize rhythmic integrity; the duration of the final note is important.
- Look at a melody as being centered on a tonic triad.
- Practice looking at and singing melodies in various clefs and ranges.
- Practice melodies that contain altered tones.
- Coach students on where to place a melody in a range of the voice that is both comfortable and executable.
- Teach students to choose an appropriate tempo for singing. The tempo of this exercise was marked *Moderato*. Although points were not deducted for an incorrect tempo set at the start of the exercise, students tended to fare worse if they chose to perform at a painstakingly slow tempo.
- Offer strategies for the sight singing process: use of the practice time, identification of tricky spots, etc.

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